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RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 6980  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000619

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREF PREL AF PK  
SUBJECT: AFGHAN REFUGEE UPDATE

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: UNHCR has suspended operations to assist Afghan refugees in repatriating from Pakistan. Repatriation from Peshawar is suspended until at least April 1, pending an assessment that it is safe for UNHCR personnel and refugees to participate. Repatriation from Quetta is also suspended, due to efforts to free UNHCR's Quetta sub-office Director John Solecki, who was abducted February 2. The Ministry of State and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) and UNHCR signed a Letter of Mutual Intent on March 13 extending the temporary stay of Afghan refugees in Pakistan to 2012. End Summary.

GOP Agrees to Host through 2012

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¶2. (U) The Ministry of State and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) and UNHCR signed a Letter of Mutual Intent on March 13 extending the temporary stay of Afghan refugees to 2012. The letter states that SAFRON will extend the validity of proof of registration (PoR) cards to Afghans living in Pakistan until the end of 2012. The letter further says that the revised strategy for management of Afghan refugees beyond 2009 would be reviewed and approved at the Cabinet level.

¶3. (U) The letter also states that UNHCR will actively engage the international community to fund the 140 million USD Refugee-Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) program over five years. Note: RAHA and its UNDP-implemented twin, the Refugee Affected Areas program, will benefit Pakistani communities and Afghan refugees through development projects in 21 affected districts through health, education, small infrastructure and water and sanitation projects.

¶4. (U) UNHCR says there are currently 1.7 million registered Afghans in Pakistan, residing in refugee villages or scattered among host communities.

Insecurity Delays Repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Pakistan

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¶5. (C) In February UNHCR announced that its offices in Afghanistan and Pakistan would postpone assisted repatriation for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Repatriation operations were suspended for the winter at the end of October 2008, and UNHCR had planned to resume operations March 1. As of March 19, UNHCR planned to reopen the voluntary repatriation center (VRC) in Peshawar on April 1, if security conditions permit. The VRC in Quetta will remain closed until Solecki is

released.

¶6. (SBU) Refugees &check out8 of Pakistan at VRCs operated by UNHCR and the Government of Pakistan. The refugees-turned-returnees &check in8 to Afghanistan at encashment centers operated by UNHCR and the Government of Afghanistan. Encashment centers are so called because returnees receive their repatriation and transportation stipends of nearly \$100 per person, plus a food allowance, during processing there. In 2008, 276,000 Afghan refugees used this process to return from Pakistan to Afghanistan. Returnees said that insecurity and inflation in Pakistan convinced them to move home, despite a dearth of jobs and services in Afghanistan. Assisted repatriation from Iran operates much differently. Suspending operations at Pakistan VRCs and Afghanistan encashment centers will have no impact on repatriation from Iran.

¶7. (C) In late February the Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees told Islamabad Refugee Affairs Specialist (RAS) that the delays were due to security concerns in Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan. On March 4 UNHCR Pakistan's assistant country representative Killian Kleinschmidt told Regional Refugee Coordinator that repatriation operations were suspended at the request of the Government of Pakistan.

¶8. (C) Kleinschmidt admitted that UNHCR remained severely shaken by the February 2 abduction of Quetta sub-office chief, Amcit John Solecki, and murder of his driver, Syed Hashim. The UNHCR Pakistan country representative and her

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deputy were working full-time to secure Solecki's release. UNHCR would not resume repatriation operations in Quetta until the Solecki case was resolved.

¶9. (C) On March 15 UNHCR Afghanistan Country Representative Ewen MacLeod advised Regional RefCoord and Kabul RAS that repatriation operations would not resume until April 1, at the earliest. MacLeod had sought assurances from UNHCR Pakistan that conditions between Peshawar and the Khyber Pass were safe enough to send returning refugees, their families, and their earthly possessions. He was dissatisfied with the response and did not want to create incentives for refugees to cross through an active counter-insurgency campaign.

¶10. (C) Comment: UNHCR's interest in assisting voluntary repatriation is tempered by concern about its staff's safety in Pakistan, and risks to returning refugees traveling to and through the Khyber Pass. UNHCR Pakistan remains shaken by the Solecki abduction. The delay puts would-be returnees in a quandary. Insecurity is likely to continue to push Afghan refugees from Pakistan, but repatriation subsidies create an incentive to remain until UNHCR resumes operations. We have been impressed by the refugee grapevine, however, and believe the refugees will obtain accurate enough intelligence to judge whether and when to return to Afghanistan.

PATTERSON